DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 493 CS 205 393

AUTHOR Bailey, Chris Howard
TITLE Improvisational Drama as a Means to Communication.
PUB DATE Oct 79
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Fall Conference of the New England Association of Teachers of English (Portsmouth, NH, October 19-21, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; *Classroom Communication; Communication (Thought Transfer); Creative Dramatics; Drama; *Drug Abuse; *English Instruction; *Literature Appreciation; Role Playing; Secondary Education; Sensory Training; Social Problems; Teaching Guides; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Improvisation

ABSTRACT

The use of improvisational drama to foster classroom communication about works of literature and about controversial topics of concern to students is described in this paper. After discussing the values of improvisational drama in the English classroom, the paper outlines a five-day sequence of exercises and activities involving relaxation, concentration, communication and awareness of others, sensory development, movement, pantomime, dialogue, and finally improvisation. It then suggests specific exercises that might introduce the study of Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People," noting that similar exercises can be used as approaches to other literary works; points to the value of helping students discuss controversial, nonliterary topics in the English classroom; and suggests a sequence of activities to lead students into improvisation related to such topics. Finally, the paper outlines a 20-day sequence that was followed in a classroom study of alcohol and drug abuse in which students role-played various situations involving drug problems, viewed and reacted to videotapes and films, and wrote and presented a scenario depicting drug abuse and its various ramifications. (GT)

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IMPROVISATIONAL DRAMA AS A MEANS TO COMMUNICATION

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Chris Howard Bailey
Paper Presented at the
Annual Conference of the
New England Association of
Teachers of English
Wentworth-by-the-Sea
Portsmouth, New Hampshire
October 19-20, 1979

CS205393

Have you ever asked your students what they thought or felt about a scene, or incident, or moment in a work of literature, and received absolute silence as a response? Perhaps you have also found that your students have a great deal of difficulty talking about an idea that you thought they would most assuredly have some thoughts on. I think communication is something we all have difficulty achieving, and our adolescent students are particularly prone to such difficulties; consequently, it is often a formidable task to get them really talking about issues that concern them. I have found, however, that by using improvisational drama in the English classroom, students are not only more willing, but more able to talk about a particular work of literature, a theme, or a controversial topic such as alcohol and drug abuse, sexual assault, child abuse, or adolescent suicide. I hope to show you how to use and apply such a teaching technique.

Improvisational drama is a theatre technique as old as the theatre itself, but often teachers are afraid to use it either because they feel they are not actresses or actors, or because they fear the consequences; they fear they will lose control of their class. Teachers do not have to be skilled artists to use the technique, however. All such use requires is some knowledge of the theory underlying improvisation, and some confidence to experiment a little. The fear that many teachers have concerning discipline will dissipate once the teacher has informed him/herself of the improvisational approach, and has prepared his/her students for such an approach--an important step as most students cannot get up and instinctively improvise.

I have used improvisational drama effectively as an approach to such varied works of literature as Macbeth, "The Lottery", An Enemy of

the People, Huckleberry Finn, and "Dulce and Decorum Est." I have also employed this technique in aiding discussion on themes, and explorations of various historical, sociological, and philosophical topics. Perhaps my most effective use of this technique has been in the examination of such difficult, controversial topics as alcohol and drug abuse. Occasionally, I have formalized some of the improvisations by adding costumes, scenery, and make-up, and toured these improvisations to other schools, other classrooms.

Each time I have used this method, it has proved a successful way of allowing the students to make some real connections with the literature studied or the topics discussed. It has helped them relate these concerns to their own lives, and helped them communicate that relation. Students are more willing and able to talk about their feelings and thoughts if they are given a non-threatening means to do so.

I would like to outline how an English teacher can introduce students to improvisation, and apply this technique to various areas. Before introducing students to such a technique, however, I would encourage willing teachers to read the opening chapters in Improvisation by John Hodgson and Ernest Richards.[1] This will give them the background necessary to begin the following sequence which will prepare the students for improvisation.

Day 1

1. If the class is new, the following exercise is good to help them relax and get to know each other:

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[1] Hodgson, J. and Richards, E., Improvisation (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1974), pp. 1-28.

Either sit in a circle/or stay in their seats; the person on their left or right (or in front or behind) says your name then his/her own.

The next person then repeats the previous two people's names and his/her own, and so on ...

Repeat the exercise and ask the students to give one specific fact about themselves along with their names - (favorite musician, food, movies, mood, etc.).

2. The most important aspect of improvisation to emphasize is concentration. Concentration develops interest and helps overcome nervousness, self-consciousness and anxiety.

Split the class into groups of ten and have each group sit on chairs in a circle. Ask them to look at each other; after half a minute ask them to count the square shapes they can see within the circle. The teacher then discusses with the class their feelings:

- how did they feel initially?
- when did they feel most at ease?
- most uncomfortable?

From this discussion they will say that they felt most at ease and most self-confident when they were concentrating on what they were doing. The first lesson is learned.

Day 2

3. The next important aspect of improvisation to emphasize is communication and awareness of others. A simple illustration:

A teacher walks into the classroom and pantomines a person waiting. The teacher exhibits developing feelings of anxiety, frustration and finally anger.

Discuss with the students what happened ...

Emphasize how the teacher communicated emotions - through gesture and movement only.

Discussion following the exercises is always important. Notice at this point the students are referring to the teacher. It is the teacher who has been exposed, not the students.

During the discussion, the teacher should shift the emphasis from him/her to the students.

- How did they notice what you were doing?
- What part of themselves enabled them to perceive you?

(NOTE: Writing assignments can be made at any time during this sequence. Students might write their responses before discussion, for example.)

This type of discussion will inevitably lead to some talk of the senses; this will open the way for the teacher to proceed with the class to the next step.

4. Development of the Senses. (these exercises also develop concentration) (Oral or written discussion should follow all of these exercises.)

A. Sound -

(1) Group sitting quietly listening to noises in and outside room.

(2) Group of three - one reads aloud, one talks, one tries to listen.

B. Sight -

(1) Have students observe a section of a floor from a distance and close up.

(2) Arrange a group of objects on a table; students close their eyes; student or teacher removes one/or a few objects. Students have to name missing objects.

(3) Give students an object. They are to devise as many uses for the object as possible.
(Written, oral, or tape-recorded exercise).

Day 3

C. Touch -

(1) Clasp hands. Where are thumbs, hands?
Rearrange normal position. How does this feel?

(2) Thumb - or arm - wrestle.

(3) Airport - (developed by the Center for Theatre Techniques in Stratford, Connecticut)
Line up two rows of parallel chairs; leave a space of three feet between them. Place objects (books, purses, rulers, etc.) in this alleyway.

Blindfold one student; tell him he is an airplane coming in to land at a foggy airport. He has to pass through the alleyway without touching any of the objects. He must trust the control tower to land him safely.

D. Smell and Taste -

(1) Homework assignment: observe the smells and tastes associated with home.

5. Movement - Exercises will be basically the same from the early grades through the 12th grade. The approach, however, will vary accordingly:

   A. Walking and running at different speeds.

   B. In pairs, mirror each other's movements.

   C. One person tell a brief story about an inanimate object; the rest of the group enact the movement.

Day 4

6. Pantomime -

   A. Each student, alone in his seat, enacts some activity (combing hair, reading, etc.)

   B. One student works on a particular activity; another student joins him in the activity.

   C. At a party, students portray people of different ages.

   D. Students pantomine automobile accident.

Day 5

7. Dialogue -

   A. Re-enact automobile scene, adding dialogue.

8. Improvisation - Start with any simple conflict situation.

   A. Student comes home late from a date; irate parents are waiting for him/her.

   B. Two college room-mates discuss the decoration of their living quarters.

   C. Salesman tries to sell customer something he does not need.

Once the students have been led through this sequence they should be ready to engage in improvisation relating to specific subject matter.

In the specific study of Henrik Ibsen's An Enemy of the People, for example, one could do the following exercise to introduce the play:

1. Choose one member of the group to leave the room. Tell the remainder to roll up their left sleeve and that when the person outside returns he will be wearing his right sleeve up: they are to respond to him as a complete outcast.

   Tell the person outside to roll up his right sleeve and try to make friends with the people inside

   Discuss the results of the improvisation. (To show the difficulty Dr. Stockmann experienced in remaining an outsider, and to emphasize the pressures of public opinion.)

2. In small groups, tell two students they are siblings and one of them has a highly infectious disease; the other has just learned of this. They are about to be collected by their friends and taken to a highly prestigious party. It is very important that they both go, as the president of the college to which they have recently applied plans to be there. Improvise first the scene between the two siblings, and then the following scene with the friends. (To show the difference between public and private morality; allegiances to family versus community.)

The teacher could then introduce the play, and at specific stages initiate various role-playing situations. For example:

1. A football player is eliminated from the school team because of his abusive behavior. He is, however, the Principal's son, and he uses his position to bribe his way back.
2. A student finds some worms in his school lunch. He reports it to the cook, but she refuses to admit they are worms, and throws the lunch

away. The student reports the incident to the Principal who suggests the student must be imagining things. The student, angered by his treatment, calls a Student Government meeting.

3. A student is the only member of his class to speak out against an aggressive teacher's exorbitant homework demands.
4. Students in an informal panel discussion argue as to whether a nuclear plant should be constructed in their town.

And so on...Follow up each role-playing situation with a discussion that leads into the situation in An Enemy of the People. It is important to emphasize here that this is not to be seen as a substitute for the work of literature, but rather a way into it--a means, an approach.

Obviously, one can apply this to other works. What one has to do is break the work down to what one sees as the essential essence of the work and then try to find some improvisation which will relate this essence to the students' own lives. In Huckleberry Finn one might want to look at prejudice, for example. In "A Rose for Miss Emily", isolation; in "The Lottery", society's need for scapegoats. One might want to teach a unit around a theme, and collect together a number of works that deal with the particular theme. Then one could use improvisation at various points in the study of the unit.

In a parallel way, perhaps, one can see how English teachers can use the same procedures for a non-literary topic even though such topics may initially seem unsuited to the English classroom. Students confront many situations and undergo many experiences about which they have a great deal of misinformation. In relation to alcohol and drug abuse, for example, most students are grossly ignorant, although they like to think otherwise. Talking about such topics in the classroom is helpful,

but students have a lot of tension about doing so. This, of course, blocks them from expressing themselves. Improvisation can help them become free of their tensions and enable them to discuss the topics. Such discussion is not only a freeing experience, but it also encourages students to be better readers. Dealing with such topics in the English classroom, therefore, is more than valid whether one starts frome one's own premises, those of one's students, or an incident in, or theme of, a work of literature. One is, after all, doing the same thing as one did in An Enemy of the People, one is encouraging one's students to connect, as E. M. Forster has said. We are getting them to talk about things that are not purely literary, but things that are obviously very crucial to their lives, and is this not something that we as English teachers should try to do anyway?

How, then, does the English teacher approach such topics? How does the student communicate his/her ideas and emotions concerning such topics? I have found the following sequence to be extremely successful:

1. Take the students through the steps previously outlined to bring them to the point where they can improvise.
2. a) Read various works of literature that relate to the topic in some way (this can be optional).
   b) Introduce through handouts and discussions the topic in question.
3. Continue sensitizing the students to the topic through various role-playing situations - (handouts and discussions).
4. Bring in guest speakers and show films on various aspects of the topic.
5. From oral and written discussions, outline a possible scenario

which would present the topic.

6. Improvise each segment of the scenario.
7. Present finished scenario to another class.
8. After presentation discuss the topic with the audience. The class presenting the topic will first respond in their roles and then as themselves playing the roles. Ideally, one of the guest speakers will attend the presentation and act as moderator.

In the specific study of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, for example, I followed the following steps:

Day 1

1. Teacher - asks students why people use drugs; put responses on blackboard and find a common thread.
2. Teacher and students - discuss the common thread - people use drugs to change the way they feel.
3. Teacher - asks students if they feel drugs solve problems: what are the dangers of drug use?
4. Teacher defined drugs.
5. Teacher defined drug abuse.
6. Teacher discussed whether all drugs were harmful.
7. Teacher presented a short rationale for studying Drug Abuse, concentrating particularly on alcohol and marijuana abuse.
8. Teacher presented overview of next four weeks.
9. Teacher asks students for questions concerning the topic and/or the next four weeks.

Day 2

1. Teacher gives students a pre-test to determine their attitudes and factual information concerning drugs and drug abuse.

2. Teacher asks students what they think are the most common types of drugs.
3. Teacher outlines the various kinds of drugs and their effects on the body and mind.

Day 3

1. Teacher continues to outline the various kinds of drugs using informational handouts.
2. Teacher asks students for questions concerning the various kinds of drugs.

Day 4

1. Teacher asks students to role-play the following situations:
   (a) It is Christmas. The family is about to have dinner. Wine is poured and father says John, 15, and Joan, 13, can have a little because it is a special occasion. Mother objects, but then relents.
   (b) John and Jane visit their close friends for a social evening. John does not drink often, so after his third drink, he refuses a fourth. Jane is angry with him for being a prude.
   (c) Peter comes home from work; he has had a bad day. His wife has been out all day working at her free-lance photography job. They both need to relax before dinner so pour a drink.
   (d) Joe's parents are getting divorced. Joe is very upset about this situation, and goes to a party feeling depressed. His friends offer him some beer and a joint. Joe's girlfriend doesn't like the way he is drinking and smoking and tells him so.

2. Teacher and students discuss why the individuals took drugs in the above situation.
   (a) Social, cultural, religious or medical reasons.
   (b) Adjunct to other activities.
   (c) For its own sake - as an anesthetic.
3. Teacher asks students if all situations are harmful and at what point might they become harmful.
4. Teacher presents information concerning the point at which, particularly alcohol and marijuana, use becomes harmful: drunkenness; hangover; distorted perception; ensuing life threatening hazards.

Day 5

1. Through a series of role-play situations the teacher presents what constitutes a drug problem, e.g.:
   (a) John, 15, cannot take his final examinations without having a drink first.
   (b) Bill is concerned that his son always comes home from a party drunk or high.
   (c) Pete arrives at work drunk; his friends try to sober him before his boss sees him. They do, but he came drunk again the next day. Some of his work mates feel they should stop protecting him.
   (d) Four friends have been to a party. Three get drunk. The fourth says he'll drive home, but the other three want to drive. Each of them claim they are perfectly safe drunken drivers.
   (e) Mary is reluctant to go to school with her broken arm. Everyone knows she was high at the school dance when she tried to jump up on the stage with the band, but instead, fell breaking her arm. She

is afraid her friends and teachers will think her really stupid. Her mother disagrees.

(f) Len and his friends are cruising the town late one night. They see another group of their friends in a car going in the opposite direction. All have been drinking and smoking. Len's friends urge him to give chase to the other car. He does, going through a red light, over people's lawns, across intersections without stopping. A police cruiser spots him.

(g) Janet and Dave have been to a drive-in movie and have had a few beers and a joint or two. After the movie, Dave suggests they go to a local bar which they do. At closing time, they decide to cruise for a while. Dave needs some cigarettes, so they decide to break into a local Cumberland Farms Store and steal some. They are caught by the police. Both Dave and Janet, when they sober up, claim they never would have done such a thing if they had been sober.

2. Teacher and students outline and discuss the drug problems depicted in each of the above situations.

Day 6

1. Teacher discussed the myths about the drug-dependent person, and the reasons for demystification.

Day 7

1. Students watch the following VTR scene:

   John's recently divorced father is continually harrassing him about the way he looks, his school work, and his friends.

John wants to be allowed more privileges, but his father disagrees, saying he isn't old enough yet. John has band practice every Thursday, only this particular Thursday he has also been invited to a party. He decides to tell his father he is going to the band practice, but goes instead to the party. At the party, everyone is drinking and smoking pot. John has never tried either before even though his father always has a drink or two each day. John's friends encourage him to try both; he does and is soon very high and eventually ill; nevertheless, he insists on driving home, and he crashes his car, seriously injuring himself.

2. Students and teacher discuss John's need to experiment; how is it similar/different from the needs any adolescent has to experiment.
3. Teacher asks students to complete a written homework assignment, outlining how John's drug experimentation is related to various attitudes in society, towards his feeling about himself, and his feelings towards an authority figure.

Day 8

1. Students discuss with teacher and class their written assignments about John's drug experimentation.
2. Teacher asks students at what point John's behavior became self-destructive.

Day 9

1. Through various role-play situations students are shown how drug abuse and dependence must be viewed in relation to other social

problems: stress; deprivations; emotional problems; childhood deprivations; various environmental conditions, e.g.:

(a) A student afraid he/she is not going to be good enough to get into college.

(b) An unwanted child trying to cope with being shunted from one estranged parent back to the other.

(c) A child who has been abused by her father.

(d) A child who was continually put down by his parents.

(e) A young man from a deprived neighborhood who cannot get a job.

(f) A young girl doesn't want to drink at a party, but her friends force her to.

2. Teacher and students will discuss how drug use does not remove a problem, but merely temporarily ameliorates and eventually compounds it.

Day 10

1. Teacher showed film on ways of preventing drug abuse.
2. Teacher followed film with oral and written discussion.

Day 11

1. Teacher brought in guest speaker to discuss various medical ways a drug dependent person might be helped.

Day 12

1. Teacher and student brainstormed on how they could present a scenario depicting drug abuse and its various ramifications.
2. Based on the discussion, an outline was made for the scenario.

Day 12 - 18

1. Parts in scenario were cast.
2. Each scene in the scenario was improvised and rehearsed.

Day 19

1. Scenario was presented to another class.
2. The guest speaker acted as moderator for the discussion following the presentation.

Day 20

1. Students discussed their responses to the presentation.
2. Students given a post-test to evaluate the change in attitudes and the increase of their understanding of information about drugs and drug abuse.

I hope I have shown, then, how once one has the courage to experiment a little, improvisational drama can be used as an effective teaching method that can foster better communication between teacher and taught, student and student. It is by no means a definitive answer to the problems we all face in the classroom at this time: the inability of most students to articulate much of what really concerns them. Perhaps, however, this is a way to ease some of the tensions, break some of the barriers. If we, as teachers of English, are reluctant to encourage such communication, where else in the curriculum can such exchange exist?

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